



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Flewitt, Rosie ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1986-0644>
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Digital Documentation: Time to think

How can practitioners use digital documentation systems in a way that recognises every child's capacity and potential, ask *Dr Rosie Flewitt* and *Dr Kate Cowan*

Early years professionals have a wealth of experience in observing and documenting young children's play, but our latest research suggests that practitioners may need more guidance about how to integrate digital documentation into their practice.

Valuing Young Children's Signs of Learning: Observation and Digital Documentation of Play in Early Years Classrooms, funded by the Froebel Trust, looked at how early years professionals use digital documentation systems, such as Tapestry, 2Build a Profile and Kinderly, to record young children's playful learning. In the study, we worked with educators in three multicultural settings to help them reflect on and develop their observation, documentation and assessment pedagogy when using digital documentation.

We found that practitioners feel under pressure to collect evidence of individual children's attainment for their EYFS Profile, and that this risks fragmenting the complex ways that children learn. All the settings tended to have richer documentation records for children who talked confidently and spoke English fluently, who preferred playing indoors and quiet activities and who joined in group activities and produced lots of 'work' (such as drawings).

By contrast, far fewer observations were made of children who were shy or lacked confidence speaking in English, who preferred physical play and spent lots of time outdoors, or who tended not to join group activities or settle down to produce 'work'. As one educator reflected, 'There seems to be a recurring theme that play that's not verbal is not as valued by the adult ... we are not good at looking at what they are telling us without verbal communication.' We suggest this paints a worrying picture of children whose learning risks going unnoticed in early years settings.

POTENTIAL AND CONSTRAINTS

Some practitioners found using digital documentation very challenging – partly because they did not feel confident using digital technology, or because they had previously 'lost' children's digital records due to technical glitches. This reflects the lack of guidance that practitioners receive on how to use digital documentation systems in ways that help them to capture the dynamic and fast-paced nature of young children's play.

Supported by the academic team, practitioners began to appreciate the potential of digital video to observe and document children's play that is easy to overlook. They found it valuable to include video clips of children's play in their documentation records, so they could re-watch them when planning for each child's learning. As one practitioner said, 'It just slows down your thinking to looking into what she's actually doing, rather than, you know, in the moment you might not think about the detail.'

Practitioners also shared the digital videos with the children themselves, and commented, 'When [the children] see that there's been put so much value in what they've done, I think they find it amazing.' However, existing digital systems were not found to be child-friendly in their design, which limited the extent to which children could view and contribute to their documentation themselves.

We suggest that more must be done to examine the potential and constraints of digital systems and traditional paper-based documentation for supporting learning. Early educators in England feel under pressure to assess children's learning against normative EYFS goals. Of course, it is important to record children's progress against milestones, but currently there is a relentless drive to 'measure' children's progress, and unfortunately this is shaping what gets recognised and valued as learning.

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We are now working with educators and with digital documentation software companies to try to make sure that they recognise the holistic nature of development, and the uniqueness of every child's capacity and potential. If we all do this, then we will be giving all children the best possible start for their learning throughout their school years and in their future lives.

This research was conducted by Dr Kate Cowan and Dr Rosie Flewitt (Founding Co-director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, UCL Institute of Education)

MORE INFORMATION

- The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy was established in 2018 to extend the work of the UCL Institute of Education, www.ucl.ac.uk
- Dr Cowan and Professor Flewitt, who has moved to the Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, are establishing a new network, 'REDD: Researching Early Years Digital Documentation'. E-mail k.cowan@ucl.ac.uk if you want to join, or follow on Twitter, [@katecowan](https://twitter.com/katecowan)
- The Froebel Trust, www.froebel.org.uk